

乌敏岛佛山亭大伯公庙

Pulau Ubin Fo Shan Ting

Da Bo Gong Temple

A Brief Guide for the 2016 Tua Pek Kong Festival

Ubin's Fo Shan Ting Da Bo Gong Temple is the temple of the island's main village. It has been and continues to be the centre of community life since at least the mid 1800s.

However, visitors are likely to miss the main temple for it sits atop 佛山 (Buddha Hill), and instead view the village temple, which draws attention largely on account of its wayang stage.



The Hilltop Temple, photograph by Timothy Pwee, 2016



The Village Temple, photograph by Timothy Pwee, 2016

With the clearance of homes, many villagers have moved to the mainland. But former villagers and their children now living on the mainland still come back annually to Ubin for the Vesak Day Tua Pek Kong festival. In 2008, the Temple Committee made an effort to recruit new members from devotees who are not

former Ubin residents. As a result, a third of the Committee now do not originate from Ubin families which reflects the living nature of the temple as a place of worship.

An inscription in the Fo Shan Ting Da Bo Gong Temple dates to 1869. This is some years after John Turnbull Thomson used Ubin granite to build Horsburgh Lighthouse in 1850. Thomson even made sketches of his Chinese stonecutters dressing the stone. In fact, granite quarrying only ended in 1999, 150 years after Horsburgh Lighthouse was built.

The Wayang Stage

It is typical of Southern Chinese temples to have a wayang (performance) stage facing the temple altar across an open space. The platform is meant for staging performances during festivals to entertain the gods in their temple. However, development has reduced the space available to most Singapore temples and only a three are known to retain their open plaza space and wayang stage. Besides Ubin, Rochore Tua Pek Kong Temple on Balestier Road is another well-known one. Most temple wayangs are now performed on temporary canvas and plank stages in any available open space such as a field or an HDB carpark. The temple then brings its deities there. The temple plaza and stage layout is still common among Malaysian and Indonesian Chinese temples.



The Wayang Stage, photograph by Timothy Pwee, 2011



Ubin Tua Pek Kong, photograph by Timothy Pwee, 2016

大伯公 [Da Bo Gong in Mandarin] Tua Pek Kong

Tua Pek Kong is the informal name for 福德正神 (Hock Teck Chia Sin), the local deity in charge of prosperity. There is a Tua Pek Kong for each location. For instance, the Ubin Tua Pek Kong would be in charge of Pulau Ubin while the Loyang Tua Pek Kong, another famous Tua Pek Kong, is responsible for Loyang.

The Tua Pek Kong 千秋 (birthday) is generally celebrated on the second day of the second lunar month. But the Ubin Tua Pek Kong communicated his wish to have it on Vesak Day instead. He gave the reason that since his temple was on Ubin's Buddha Hill, he would strive to emulate the Buddha and become a Bodhisatva. Hence the choice of Vesak Day, Buddha's birthday, as his festival day.

Besides Tua Pek Kong, there are two other deities enshrined in his temple: the Tiger and Earth Gods.



Tiger Deity, photograph by Timothy Pwee, 2016

虎爷 [Hu Ye in Mandarin] Tiger Deity

The Hor Yeh or Tiger Deity is commonly associated with Tua Pek Kong and is a protector against evil influences and dark magic. You will often see him under the Tua Pek Kong altar in other temples. At Ubin, he has his own cave beside the hilltop temple. There, worshippers often bring him offerings of meat and eggs.



Jade Emperor Tablet & Urn photograph by Timothy Pwee, 2011

玉皇上帝 [Yu Huang Shang Di in Mandarin]

The Jade Emperor

The ruler of the popular pantheon of Chinese gods is the Jade Emperor. It is to His court that the deities report. All temples would have an urn at their entrance which always faces south. All pay their respects with incense to the Jade Emperor, putting their joss sticks in the urn. Respects are paid to him daily and also at the beginning and end of every ceremonial occasion. That is why ceremonies to Him open and close festivals.

The Jade Emperor is more popularly called 天公 (ti kong) by the Hokkiens and often worshipped daily in people's homes. The Ti Kong joss stick urn will be hung above the main entrance or main window of their homes. For shophouses, the urn is often high on the wall or pillar by the entrance.



Earth God, photograph by Timothy Pwee, 2016

土地公 [Tu Di Gong in Mandarin]

Earth God

Much like the Tua Pek Kong, the Earth God or Earth Deity is in charge of a local area but has a specific focus on agricultural fertility. He is common in agricultural villages across China.

There is also the Datuk Kong whose shrine is by the village temple. Like his colleagues, the Earth God and Tua Pek Kong, the Datuk Kong is a locality deity.

大伯公千秋

Tua Pek Kong Festival Events

Invitation to the Festival

(Fri 20 May 2016, 10am)

The opening ritual of the Ubin Tua Pek Kong birthday on Vesak Day begins by inviting Him to attend the festival. The statue of Tua Pek Kong from the main altar will be set upon the seat of a sedan chair and worshippers carry this palanquin on their shoulders down to the lower temple. Others will carry the statues of the Tiger Deity and the Earth God in their hands and follow in entourage. The trio will be installed in the village temple and offered meats, fish, fruit, sweets and incense.



Tua Pek Kong on Sedan Chair, photograph by Vivienne Wee, 2015

Distribution of Offerings

(Sat 21 May 2016, 2.30pm)

An important custom is the making of offerings to the temple for the festival by devotees, often as an expression of thanks to Tua Pek Kong for a good year. Tables heavily laden with foods from meats to rice will be consecrated during the opening ceremonies. After the Jade Emperor is sent off, these offerings will be distributed among the villagers.

Visit by 韦陀法宫 大二爷伯

(Wei Tua Temple Tua Ji Ya Pek Visit)

(Sat 21 May 2016, 8pm)

The other temple on Ubin is 韦陀法宫 (Wei Tuo Temple). Among the residents at that temple are Tua Ji Ya Pek, a pair of bailiffs from the Underworld whose main role is to escort souls for judgement. Their 童乩 (tangkis or spirit mediums) will make a trip to pay their respects to Tua Pek Kong during the festival.



Tua Ya Pek, photograph by Vivienne Wee, 2015



Wayang Performer, photograph by Vivienne Wee, 2015

Wayang

(Nightly Fri 20 to Tue 24 May 2016)

The traditional entertainment during temple festivals is the wayang (Chinese opera). The Pulau Ubin Tua Pek Kong Temple traditionally engages a Teochew troupe. 新新荣和 (Sin Sin Yong Hwa) will be performing this year. The performances are from various operas and vary from year to year but the final night (will be Tue 24 May this year) is always 葫芦收妖 (Gourd Captures the Evil Spirits).

During the performances, watch for 孩子 (Hai Ji), the child god of theatre. Before the start of each performance, an actor and actress in full costumes and make-up will descend from the wayang stage with Hai Ji. They will pay their respects to Tua Pek Kong and install Hai Ji at the temple's altar table facing the wayang stage to watch.

Near the end of the performance, the temple keeper will carry Hai Ji back to the stage on a tray where a costumed and made-up actress will receive the statue. Between performances, Hai Ji's statue resides on the wayang stage altar at the platform's rear.

歌台 (Getai)

(Wed 25 May 2016, 6.45pm)

In this modern world, tastes have moved from traditional opera to the popular variety show featuring pop music and dancing. Changing tastes in entertainment has meant that the getai (literally meaning 'song stage') has become as popular as the wayang, if not more. Getais are rousing performances by popular singers in glitzy costumes

interspersed with comic relief by comperes. Gaining in popularity as Seventh Month entertainment since the 1970s, they are increasingly staged during temple festivals too. The last night of the Ubin Tua Pek Kong Festival is now a getai night.



Getai, photograph by Vivienne Wee, 2015

Closing the Festival

(Wed 25 May 2016, 10.30pm)

At the end of the Festival, Tua Pek Kong will be returned to his hilltop temple. But one other thing must be done first: a ceremony by the beach to send off that other invisible audience, those from the spirit world. There, paper offerings are burnt to them.



Burning of Paper Offerings, photograph by Vivienne Wee, 2015

Free Evening Bumboat Ferry

As a good deed, temple devotees sponsor a free ferry service from Ubin back to Changi starting from sunset to around 10pm. The ferry to Ubin is also free from 6.30pm till around 9-10pm.

May 2016 Free Services

Fri 20 May	Changi to Ubin: 6.30pm - 9.00pm Ubin to Changi: 8.00pm - 10.00pm
Sat 21 May	Changi to Ubin: 6.30pm - 9.00pm Ubin to Changi: 8.00pm - 10.30pm
Sun 22 – Tue 24 May	Changi to Ubin: 6.30pm - 9.00pm Ubin to Changi: 8.00pm - 10.00pm
Wed 25 May	Changi to Ubin: 6.30pm - 9.00pm Ubin to Changi: 6.30pm - 10.30pm

Programme for 2016 Vesak Day 庆祝大伯公千秋

Fri 20 May 2016 四月十四日 (4M14)	10am Invite Tua Pek Kong 11am Rituals Begin 3.30pm Rite 1 7pm Rite 2 7pm Teochew Opera 10pm Inviting the Jade Emperor
Sat 21 May 2016 四月十日 (4M15) Vesak Day	10am Rituals Begin 1pm Lion & Dragon Dance 2.30pm Distribution of Offerings 3.30pm Sending off the Jade Emperor 7pm Teochew Opera 7.30pm Crossing the Peace Bridge 8pm Visit of Wei Tuo Temple Tua Ji Ya Pek
Sun 22 – Tue 24 May 2016 四月十六至十八日 (4M16-4M18)	7pm Teochew Opera
Wed 25 May 2016 四月十九日 (4M19)	10am Teochew Opera (singing only) 6.45pm Getai 10.30pm Sending Tua Pek Kong back

Text by Timothy Pwee.

Information & Editing by Vivienne Wee, Eva Wong, Gloria Seow, and the Taoism Singapore stalwarts, Ronni Pinsler, Victor Yue, and Margaret Chan.

Photographs by Vivienne Wee, Timothy Pwee.

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Singapore Heritage Society

50 East Coast Road

#02-73 Roxy Square

Singapore 428769

Tel: 63455770

Fax: 63456713

Email: shs.secretary@gmail.com

Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/sgheritage>